

(Dis)advantage and (Dis)engaged: Reflections from the First Year of Secondary School in Australia

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Abstract

Adolescents continue to be at risk of disengaging from formal education, particularly in the transition year from primary to secondary schooling. This is a critical time in their education journey and can affect their ongoing academic performances. This paper reflects on the initial findings of a project to gauge students' levels of engagement in the first year of secondary school (12-13 years of age). The project was undertaken with students in 4 schools in two Australian states, located in low socio economic areas. Approximately 80 students from the 4 schools were selected to participate in an intervention project with specific targeted activities that aimed to increase levels of engagement in schooling to eventually aid them to aspire to desired career choices. A mixed methods research approach enabled us to capture, analyse and report on the participating students' perceptions in terms of their attitudes towards schooling, their academic performance, and selected aspects of school life. We also interviewed their parents and teachers about these topics. The results indicated that there were some changes in attitudes towards schooling for some individuals, but generally the majority of student engagement levels remained static or tended to be negative. This remains a cause of concern for educators who are trying to find ways to encourage students to be more engaged with formal education that supports their career aspirations.

Keywords: intervention programs, low socio-economic students, student engagement

1. Introduction

The social and academic needs of students in middle-years are located within the school and its culture not simply in academic activity (Stoll, Fink, & Earl, 2003). However, "for some marginalised students, it is the particular culture of the school that does not easily allow them to belong" (McKenna et al., 2013, p. 224). A report by Lee et al. (1999) recognised that schools and school cultures remain a vital aspect in extending students' academic knowledge. The Lee report also recommended that secondary schools in particular should address two complementary matters to improve student academic knowledge—social support and an emphasis on academic curriculum. The report suggested that this combination is a key link to high levels of student engagement in learning (Lee et al., 1999, p. 28). Whilst there is a need to emphasise academic requirements as an essential part of middle-years schooling, there is a need to ensure it is relevant, engaging and personally satisfying for students (Manzo, 2000).

Discussions regarding disengaged students in the middle-years of schooling has abounded for many years (e.g. Hill et al., 1993; Middle Years Research and Development, 2001; Luke et al., 2003). It is manifested in reported behaviours such as declining levels of student enjoyment and achievement regarding school participation, alienation, increases in at-risk behaviours (such as truancy, disruptive class behavior, low self-esteem) and early school leaving that is often associated with unemployment. As such, (dis)engagement remains an ongoing concern, further evidenced by the large number of academic articles on the topic as well as opinions and narratives shared online in forums such as *Aussie Educator* (2013). Position statements, support materials, samples of work, and various Departments of Education reports, have been made available to advise and guide what needs to be done to improve the levels of engagement of students in the middle years and to promote successful learning behaviours.

Too many young people are disengaged from school, especially during the middle years of schooling (Years 5 to 9). Disengagement and low achievement are strong predictors of lifelong

socio-economic disadvantage. Worryingly, they are more prevalent amongst students growing up in poorer families and in schools with high concentrations of these students. (Black, 2007, p. 7)

Evidence based research (e.g. Mithaug, Agran, Martin, & Wehmeyer, 2003) suggests that students' perception of contexts and events can discourage their engagement when they regard it as being unimportant to them or when they feel that it is impossible to control. Because every circumstance is filtered through these personalised views of what constitutes an opportunity, or an obstacle, students' beliefs will affect their engagement and learning and is therefore important to capture and understand.

In balancing social and learning goals, students have to cope within their social domain whilst pursuing their academic goals. Early adolescents also have to deal with their own emotional state, their interests, and acceptance of their personal physical and biological changes. Self-esteem is important in dealing with personal insecurity and vulnerability. While individual characteristics and relationships influence their motivation to learn, for many students, self-concept and self-esteem are at their lowest during early adolescence. Students will engage in tasks where they feel confident and competent and tend to avoid those in which they do not.

Many studies have indicated that students who adopt task-focused goals are learning for intrinsic reasons and are more likely to engage in deep cognitive processing, while students who adopt performance-focused goals tend to use surface level strategies (e.g. Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Dweck, 1996). Kindermann et al. (1996) described engaged students as those who are able to select tasks appropriate to their competencies, take initiative, exert effort and concentration, and persist when tasks demand more than routine effort.

While there may be discussions around the source and type of (dis)engagement there is general agreement that intrinsically motivated behaviour plays a significant role in a student's engagement with regard to classroom learning (e.g. Brown, 1994; Anderman, 1994; Dweck, 1996). When students are intrinsically motivated they become more focused on their work because they are task oriented, and generally experience higher levels of successful outcomes. They have an increased desire to achieve mastery of the task or skill in question and are able to build this into their rationale for successfully completing assigned classroom work. Additionally, collaboration among peers and a focus on experiential and self-directed learning can act as intrinsic motivators and become important considerations in middle-years teaching and learning scenarios. Therefore, any consideration of (dis)engagement should explore how teachers might work with their students to provide opportunities to build self esteem, encourage intrinsic motivation and create contexts for students to experience successful outcomes at their appropriate levels as determined by how they articulate what they want to achieve as longer term goals.

Student engagement can be defined as the level of participation and intrinsic interest that a student shows in school. Engagement in schoolwork involves both behaviours (such as persistence, effort, attention) and attitudes (such as motivation, positive learning values, enthusiasm, interest, pride in success). Thus, engaged students seek out activities, inside and outside the classroom, that lead to success or learning. They display curiosity, a desire to know more, and positive emotional responses to learning and school. (Akey, 2006, p. 6)

2. The Project

In this paper we focus on (dis)engagement in the first year of secondary schooling in two Australian states with students who were 12 and 13 years of age. We worked with approximately 80 students in four disadvantaged schools, in two Australian States. We know educational disadvantage is linked to geographic disadvantage and Australian students from poorer communities achieve at lower levels than those from more affluent zones (Teese & Polesel, 2003; Australian Council for Educational Research, 2004). The project was designed to support targeted groups of disadvantaged students to become more engaged in their schooling. The project was designed to provide the students, who were in Year 7 in one state and Year 8 in the other (the first year of their respective secondary schooling), with continuing support to stay engaged in formal schooling so that they might access opportunities for future study that would give them greater choice of career paths. The project consisted of a number of activities that were offered to the participating students throughout the school year. They comprised of:

- **Clubs:** weekly clubs of organised activities that were designed to enable the students to develop the skills and knowledge that were regarded as being essential for school success within a positive, safe and supportive environment.
- **Inspirational Speakers:** visited the school or local community halls, to speak to the students about aspects of their lives to broaden and expand their ideas of potential careers and future achievements. It

was hoped that the speakers would motivate the students to think broadly and decisively about their potential plans for their future.

- **Leadership Camps:** to extend the students' social skills (such as self-confidence, self esteem and team building skills) through a number of team building and individual activities
- **Computers:** affordable Internet-ready computers, skills training and ongoing support were provided to families of participating students.
- **Social gatherings:** to bring the students, their families, teachers and others together to celebrate what they were engaged in.

The project and all its activities were complementary to existing school programs and either ran during school time e.g. the camp, or were an extension to the school day e.g. the weekly clubs. The main goal was to improve the students' motivation and engagement by enhancing their social and emotional skills; their awareness of career options and study pathways; and to provide them with academic support at all levels of interactions. As Tadlich et al. (2007) suggested, middle-years students require a sense of ownership of their learning, and introducing novel teaching and learning approaches to motivate learners can assist to engage students. Additionally, the programs were to provide opportunities to further engage parents with their child/children's schooling and the community.

Specifically, this paper addresses the students' perceptions of schooling and academic performance as well as their social disposition to school, including their future aspirations and their belief in whether they were possible.

3. Methods

The purpose of the research was to examine if the various components that made up the project increased perceived levels of engagement and if commensurate successes in schooling were achieved. The data were derived from various methods including surveys, student focus groups and interviews with parents and teachers. This mixed method approach enabled this project to interrogate the data at a broad (survey) and more detailed (interview/focus group) level, to determine if the intervention contributed to improved student engagement. The data analysis is therefore an interpretive approach that is founded more specifically in a constructivist paradigm adopting a methodology that supports inquiry into the meanings or understandings of the participants' explanations.

The research and the data collection procedures received ethical approval from the university and from the respective education departments from each state. The first stage of the data collection was to gather baseline data from the students. An online survey was completed at the beginning of the project. Fifty four students completed the first survey. A follow up survey was conducted in October of the same year—6 months after the original. The survey was designed to identify demographic information, and then to collect information under key areas including student engagement, age appropriate social skills and career options and pathways.

We visited each school in May (Term 2) and October (Term 4). During the first visit we talked with the teachers to discuss the cohort's cultural and contextual background to provide a broader understanding of the context, and we were also able to explain the various components of the project to ensure we had shared understandings about its focus and structure. The data collected were transcribed and analysed and emergent themes were derived. Teachers also completed a brief survey (paper version) at the end of the interview to provide additional data that could be reported under the project themes.

As well as capturing data from the students and teachers it was important to gather input from the students' parents. Telephone interviews with semi-structured questions were conducted over a two-week period at the start of the school year (March) and followed up in October. These were recorded and transcribed for analysis according to common themes. All interviews helped to provide an overview of the context in which the research took place.

The decision to undertake semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers was designed to gain rich data from individuals and to allow opportunities for the researcher to explore and probe the issues further. Interview guides were designed to ensure certain topics could be explored in depth regarding the various aspects of the project.

The focus groups were conducted in Term 4 (October) to coincide with the second visit to each school, with two research team members to enable in-depth discussions to occur from the student perspectives about the various programs. The researchers were cognisant of the fact that students are acute observers of their own learning experiences and competent at reporting on the characteristics of their schooling and the characteristics they find

conducive to learning. The focus groups were conducted to obtain participants patterns of behaviour and discover their understanding of the main themes of the project's intentions. All data was audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The transcripts were compiled and read through by the researchers to identify key themes. This analysis formed the basis of the qualitative findings reported. The comments selected were those that best—and most coherently—represent the experiences and/or perspectives of the identified theme.

The quotes elaborate on the quantitative findings, to provide a descriptive enrichment of analysis of the data that represent how individual participants feel about their experiences. A focus has also been on including contradictory statements where possible, to ensure the reliability of the research. This process helps to minimise any bias in the representation and discussion of the identified quantifiable data.

This investigation is also limited to the 4 schools that were preselected to be involved in the Project where we researchers are considered as “outsiders”. Whilst every conceivable effort is made to minimise this contributing factor, by ongoing contact (i.e. time on-site) and by building a good and trusting rapport with participants, there will always remain some impact on the information being gathered.

4. Results and Discussion

A baseline survey was used to acquire information about the background of the students and reveal their attitudes and beliefs about their schooling. There were 54 baseline student survey responses received from four schools (students were around 13 years of age). 55% (n=30) were female and 45% (n=25) were male. Sixteen per cent (n=9) identified themselves as having an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background.

The number of responses from surveys and interviews that were conducted at the two stages of data collection is shown in the Table 1 below:

Table 1. Number of responses

Data Collection methods	Time 1 (May)	Time 2 (October)
Student Surveys	54	56
Parent Phone Interviews	17	8
Teacher Interviews	12	11
Teacher Surveys	11	13
Welfare organisation staff	8	9

Just over half of all student participants (54%, n=29) lived in a two-parent family. Of the remaining students, the majority lived in a single parent family with their mother (41%, n=22), while a small proportion lived in households with a single father, grandparents or aunts (6%, n=3). In 94% (n=51) of the cases, English is the main language spoken at home. The remaining three families indicated they spoke a language other than English at home.

In the first part of the survey the students indicated whether they had access to a computer prior to the project. Twenty six per cent of the students (n=14) said that they had their own computer and 72% (n=39) indicated that they had a laptop or desk computer that they shared with other family members. Only 15% (n=8) had a mobile phone of their own, and only six per cent (n=3) reported having another mobile device such as an iPad. Ninety-one per cent of the students (n=49) surveyed said that they had access to the Internet outside of school.

4.1 Student Perspectives

A clear intention of the project was to initiate a variety of activities with the aim of improving student engagement with school. It was therefore important to understand and identify the students' perceptions at the beginning of the year prior to any participation in school or program activities. Obtaining baseline evidence will enable longer term evaluations regarding levels of engagement.

In the first section of the survey there were a number of questions, which identified the student's initial perceptions of their level of engagement to school. The responses given revealed that a large percentage of the students (87%) had a strong belief that education is important for their future and this is supported by a high percentage (70%) who strongly agreed with the statement “I want to learn.” Additionally, a high percentage of

students (81%) indicated that they felt (strongly agree/agree) that they “belong at my school”, 81% said felt safe at school while 68% said they want to go to school on most days. Only one student indicated that they felt that they did not belong at school and did not feel safe there, while three students reported that they did not want to go to school most days. Around three-quarters of the students (78%) feel their teachers are helpful in their quest to do well at school. The baseline data for students’ engagement with school is shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Engagement with school

Survey questions	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Student responses in percentages (%)					
I want to learn	70	30	0	0	0
I feel I belong at my school	45	36	17	2	0
I feel safe at my school	37	44	17	2	0
I want to go to school on most days	36	32	26	2	4
My education is important for my future	87	13	0	0	0
Teachers at my school really want to help students to understand their work	52	26	22	0	0

The intention of this paper is to highlight quantitative data that clearly determines if there were any initial shifts or trends associated with the students’ engagement and participation in the project in the initial year of the project. Paired sample t-tests were used to establish if any significant differences in mean student attitudes between the two time-points were evident. The two time points were from early year (before the start of the project) to the end of year (following participation in the different project’s programs) approximately 6 months apart. Statements that are found to be significantly different for those students who completed both surveys are reported as showing a short term shift over the 6 month period. There were 36 students who were identified as having completed both surveys.

With regard to students perceived levels of engagement at school, there were three statements identified as being significantly different for the matched cohort of students over the time period (n=36).

- 1) There was a significant difference in the mean score for the statement: *My education is important for my future* (Note 1). This trend revealed that while the students remained positive about their education, the decrease in the score shows that strength of this agreement was not as high as it was at the start of the year
- 2) Another significant difference was determined regarding the statement: *I feel safe at school* (Note 2). Students were reporting that they did not feel as safe at school as they were at the start of the school year as shown by a decrease in the mean student attitudes score.
- 3) The final significant difference was related to the statement: *Teachers at my school really want to help students to understand their work* (Note 3). There was a decrease in agreement with this statement over the time period.

There was some clear indication in the focus group data (that aligned with completing the survey on the second occasion) that some students held negative views about their teachers. For example:

“Actually teachers are like hating me. Like in HPE I try really hard and the teacher gives me like a C minus and I was like, ‘what the, hello! I try so hard and you give me a C minus’” (Focus Group, Oct 2011)

“My English teacher hates me. [Researcher: is that because you don’t try hard in class?] I do, he just doesn’t like me because of the stuff I do in class” (Focus Group, Oct 2011).

However, there were also some positive comments forthcoming from the students in the focus group, such as:

“I’m good friends with all the teachers ... I used to get C’s in primary school and now that high school is more social and it’s more easier I get A’s” (Focus Group, Oct 2011).

To further understand how the students perceived their school life, 6 statements were included on their academic performance and specifically on their perseverance and commitment to learning. The baseline evidence for students’ engagement to school is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Engagement and academic performance

Survey questions	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
	Student responses in percentages (%)				
I want to achieve the best results I can at school.	85	15	0	0	0
It is important for me to do my best in my schoolwork.	80	17	3	0	0
I try hard with my schoolwork.	57	34	9	0	0
If there’s something I don’t understand, I keep working at it until I do.	30	42	24	4	0
If there’s something I don’t understand, I ask my teachers for help.	54	37	7	2	0
Trying hard is considered important at my school.	59	37	2	2	0

It is evident from Table 3 that at the start of the year students were generally positive about their desire to achieve their best at school, they persevered with school tasks and sought help from peers and/or teachers when necessary. In fact, all of the students wanted to achieve the best results they could and the vast majority (97%, n=52) thought it was important to do their best. However, over the six-month interval between the baseline and follow-up surveys, a significant difference for the statement: *It is important for me to do my best in my school work*, was identified (Note 4) for the matched cohort of 36 students. This indicates that while the students were generally in agreement, a significant number of individuals felt less strongly about the importance of “doing their best”.

The evidence from the focus groups also highlighted the peer pressure faced by this age cohort to achieve at school. For example,

Some people tease us for getting an award because we’re smart (Focus Group, Oct 2011).

Apparently it’s not cool to be smart. It’s cool to be dumb (Focus Group, Oct 2011).

Additional statements in the survey were included to attempt to explore aspects of school life that might be regarded as being more negative. They were designed to probe more deeply into the problematic behaviours that had been identified by teachers, and the literature as being major issues or problems associated with this age cohort of students. These included statement *I can’t wait for the school day to be over quickly*, statement *I hand in assessment tasks late*, statement *I find it difficult to get myself organised for school*, statement *I go to school without finishing my homework*, and statement *I often disrupt the classes I am in* (see Table 4).

Table 4. Aspects of school life

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Never
Survey questions	Student responses in percentages (%)			
I can't wait for the school day to be over quickly.	41	34	23	2
I hand in assessment tasks late	7	15	48	30
I find it difficult to get myself organised for school	7	26	39	28
I go to school without finishing my homework.	7	11	61	20
I often disrupt the classes I am in.	7	7	35	50

There was only one statement here that was determined to have a significant difference and therefore showed a change in behaviours for the matched group of 36 students. *I often disrupt the class I am in* was significantly different (Note 5). It revealed that over the course of the year the behaviour of some students was declining and more of them were involved or displaying disruptive behaviours in school. In the focus groups, two students identified their classroom behaviour as being disruptive:

I'm good when I feel like it but sometimes as you can see I have too much energy. I get distracted too easily (Focus Group, Oct 2011).

Sometimes I get sent out of the classroom because I talk really loud because I get really distracted. But sometimes I'm a really good student, sometimes (Focus Group, Oct 2011).

In contrast, three statements: statement *I go to school full of enthusiasm and ready to learn*), statement *I enjoy the tasks/activities that the teachers set*, and statement *I have opportunities to do things that interest me at school* from the survey were framed around more positive behaviours (see Table 5).

Table 5. Enjoyment of school life

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Never
Survey questions	Student responses in percentages (%)			
I go to school full of enthusiasm and ready to learn	32	44	22	2
I enjoy the tasks/activities that the teachers set	23	30	43	4
I have opportunities to do things that interest me at school	39	41	20	0

Statement *I go to school full of enthusiasm and ready to learn* (See Table 5) was identified as being significantly different between surveys (Note 6). The nature of the difference indicated that over the course of the year students were less enthusiastic about going to school. This is a worrying trend.

One approach to inspire students in their quest to remain enthusiastic toward school and life success was the inclusion of inspirational speakers at the start of the year. The students were enthused by the speakers' message and spoke positively of the lessons they had drawn from them. These included how to stand up for yourself and never give up if you really want to achieve a specific goal:

"I thought he was inspirational and he told us how to stand up for yourself and how to meet challenges and how to get through it ... he told us what happened to him at school. They cut his legs and he didn't feel it as spina bifida. They cut his toes and he didn't feel it" (Focus Group, October).

"The doctor's told her parents that she'd never be able to walk or do anything and then she became an Olympic swimmer ... [Researcher: And what did you learn from hearing her story?] That you can do anything because she became an Olympic swimmer and won gold" (Focus Group, October).

“She was inspirational! She told us never to give up. She told us how, like when she was little she had something wrong with her legs, but she always wanted to swim. She followed her dream and now she’s like a medallist. She had photos and that” (Focus Group, October).

4.2 Teacher, Parent and Welfare Staff Perspectives

The student surveys provided a base of attitudinal data and contributed to identifying shifts in perceived levels of engagement over the first year of secondary school. The survey responses highlighted six significant attitudinal changes from the start of the project until later in the year. These were related to:

- 1) My education is important to my future
- 2) I feel safe at school
- 3) Teachers at my school really want to help students to understand their work
- 4) It is important for me to do my best at school
- 5) I often disrupt the classes I am in
- 6) I go to school full of enthusiasm and ready to learn.

To further understand the changes, it was important to gather information from staff, teachers and the welfare personnel involved with the students, as well as their parents. This was achieved in interviews throughout the year that allowed the issues to be explored more fully.

Data collected from the parents resonated with the students’ own initial views, in that the students and their parents generally had a positive perspective on their engagement and opportunities for learning at school. When the parents were initially interviewed most indicated that they were happy about their child’s level of engagement at school in relation to the specific behaviours (indicators of student engagement) listed in Table 6.

The majority of parents who either strongly agreed or agreed that their child:

Table 6. Parent responses

	Baseline evidence (n=17)
a. Would choose this school	15 (88%)
b. Generally enjoys school	16 (94%)
c. Wants to go to school	14 (82%)
d. Doesn’t find it difficult to be organized for school	9 (53%)
e. Feels valued	12 (70%)
f. Goes to school enthusiastically	15 (88%)
g. Enjoys learning	14 (82%)
h. Was helped by teachers	12 (70%)
i. Was treated fairly at school	15 (88%)
j. Tried hard	12 (70%)

While only eight parents participated in the phone interview in October/November, they continued to be positive about their child’s engagement with school and in particular, spoke of the engagement they had felt with the different programs. For example one parent said:

“She says it’s fun on Thursdays when she goes and she enjoyed the camp a lot. She finds it a nice stress relief time” (Parent Phone Interview, October).

Generally, parents gave positive responses regarding their children’s relationships with their peers in the project. For example:

“She’s enjoying meeting other people and socialising out of school hours with them” (Parent Phone Interview, October).

“He gets up and interacts with the group and he’s becoming more outgoing and able to get up and talk about things” (Parent Phone Interview, October).

When asked whether or not they thought their children’s social skills and their self-belief had improved since joining the project, three parents responded as follows:

“Oh yes definitely. He’s different when he walks out of school. Normally at night he’s quite serious or he might be walking out on his own, but on a Wednesday night he always comes back from [welfare group name] meetings smiling when he comes out the gate” (Parent Phone Interview, November).

“Definitely ... He gets up and interacts with the group and he’s becoming more outgoing and able to get up and talk about things. He’s getting better” (Parent Phone Interview, November).

“She’s just really enjoying the whole experience ... she’s enjoying meeting other people and socialising out of school hours with them” (Parent Phone Interview, November).

Another parent captured the significance of her child’s increase in self-confidence and being able to clearly articulate her goals and aspirations:

“She’s a lot more positive about herself. I think she sent herself a postcard, it came in the mail and it says, ‘you’re going to do really well in life’ and she’s got her goals up on her wall” (Parent Phone Interview, November).

The camp enabled many students to experience team building, individual challenges, problem solving and social exchanges with different people. The camp was seen as a motivator to enable individual students to develop their social skills and this was evident in comments from two parents:

“She always talks to me [about the weekly Clubs] ... Especially about the camp, she enjoyed it. It’s just brought her more confidence to try different things. She’s more confident at school and at home, with her friends and doing things around the house like cooking for the family” (Parent Phone Interview, November).

“I did notice a difference from the camp. I noticed that when she came home from camp she was a little bit more considerate of other people in the family. She actually came back a little more respectful, only for a few weeks of course [laughs]. She came home and she was using her manners and almost [had] more of a maturity in the way she was discussing or talking about things” (Parent Phone Interview, November).

4.3 Staff Views on Student Engagement

The range of views held by the teachers and welfare staff provided further insight into the whole school context of student engagement to school and learning. The majority of teachers interviewed felt that most students in Year 8 enjoyed school, were enthusiastic, focused and attentive in class, and that they believed in the importance of doing well at school to get a good job. For example, in the second group of teacher interviews (October), some of the teachers provided examples of the ways in which they believed participation in the project had resulted in increased level of student engagement in their schooling. This was important because the weekly clubs endeavoured to provide skills and opportunities to engage the different learning styles of students and to develop strategies to become more confident in their behaviours and in their academic performances. Noticeable changes are described below. The first vignette is an example of how one student displayed flexibility in being able to deal with a difficult situation:

“We have had things like [one student] sitting up on stage doing our welcome to country at our assemblies ... without the drama workshop she would not have had the confidence to do it ... what she really had the confidence about was that there was a stuff up—when she got up on stage ... the wrong lectern was there and what happened was that she didn’t chuck a wobbly and burst into tears and stomp off ... and say ‘I am not doing this’ ... but she said—‘it’s not here... where is it [the lectern]’? ... and so you have this little kid saying this is wrong and having people run around to get the right lectern set up. She did it—she kept her cool—that was the thing—she did it! And she had a couple of hundred people waiting and did not panic!” (Teacher Interview, October).

Another two teachers explained the broader benefits of participation in the project:

“I can see it in the playground. I can see them in their interactions with each other and even before school. This young, shy [student] he won’t have a problem going out of his way to [a teacher] so you can see them coming out in confidence” (Teacher Interview, October).

“One of the boys who has just joined the group ... we tried to get him in in March, but he did not want to join. But now he has just joined ... I can see so strongly for him that he feels part of the group. And there is quite a bubbly girl who is part of it and he’s picked up on that ... [he] really enjoys that and we’ve made other changes in his schooling ... he is much more positive this term than he was last term. You know last term I was really worried about his welfare but this term he has a smile on his face most of the time and he is chirpy and he’s not getting into trouble ... There was [also] a teacher with whom he was always clashing... and we’ve changed that teacher and he is much, much better ... now he has come back and he is social and come back in and the Maths class is much better...” (Teacher Interview, October).

However, as one would expect with a diverse group, there were some references to a lack of engagement with school as described by one teacher following a presentation night:

“The parents came ... we had a [presentation night] with [the other school] ... they had their own presentations they were working on ... and we went to a hall from six thirty until about nine thirty. They were all to be presented with their laptops as well on that night. It was a motivation to be there. Not all of our students turned up and I think that’s probably one of the things I found most upsetting because there wasn’t many. And so there were some [instances] where [the group would] be in three’s and then [on the night] there was just one person left ... you know? But they did really well, they worked it out really well” (Teacher Interview, October).

Another example highlights how the weekly Club engaged one student, but unfortunately this was not extended to his broader school experience:

“There’s a boy who wagged school, but he comes here for [weekly clubs]. He’ll put his school uniform on and he’ll turn up for the Club. Last week he was away—he wagged for a couple of days—and he turned up in his school uniform so that I would think he’d been there all day. But the Deputy Principal was waiting for him and escorted him out. He did go to the club but he was halfway through it and to the Deputy’s credit he let the Club finish and then he pulled him aside” (Teacher Interview, October).

Further, as an indication of the levels of engagement in the Club component of the project, one of the welfare staff stated:

“There are some students who have a very short attention span ... so they might get the first three or four sentences, then ... they might start drawing on themselves or somebody else beside them. Some students you’re constantly bringing back to attention and to the circle for instructions. They don’t mind hanging out [at the Clubs], but they’re not always actively engaged in the activity, so they might sit out on an edge or hang about. And then we find with some [students] that they then don’t come the next week, and then [they] drift in the following week ... If they’re not actively engaged in the activity then they are more likely to run, to leave or to not come next week” (welfare staff, November).

When asked what their expectations of the students were across the course of the project, teachers and welfare staff also expected the students to receive specific educational benefits (i.e. literacy and numeracy skills) but also increased personal skills. As one welfare staff member said:

“I hope to see them grow emotionally, as well as building on the literacy and numeracy skills as well. Just to become more confident, but just at the end of the term if they have a clear idea about the pathway that they’re going to take from now on. Get a bit of any idea about what area they might want to get into and how they would go about getting that” (Welfare staff Interview, November).

In an effort to inspire students, dynamic motivational speakers were invited to attend the opening ceremony for each of the projects in both States. It was hoped the passionate individuals would inspire and motivate the students to become more willing to be engaged in learning and the schooling process. The speakers shared individual stories of their own success as well outlining difficulties they had to overcome to enjoy their success. A strong theme that, ‘you can do anything’ was reported by many students in the focus groups as well as in the interviews with the teachers and the welfare organisation staff in both states. For example, the majority of teachers, and welfare staff interviewed agreed that the inspirational speakers were interesting and engaging:

“The Impact! kids stayed behind and asked ... [the speaker] questions—they were interested in him ... what the kids at school did to him [was horrible] ... after [the speaker] a couple of kids thought: ‘Wow! If he got through that I can too!’” (Teacher Interview, October).

A teacher highlighted the ways in which learning could become less mundane and visible when it was meaningful and authentic:

“I think it’s a clever way to educate them on literacy, and communication and social skills without ever letting them know they’re learning ... I just think this is extra education for them that they don’t even know they’re getting” (Teacher Interview, October).

Furthermore, in order to achieve the desired benefits that the programs have to offer, regular attendance at the clubs each week was considered to be beneficial. Attendance records for the weekly clubs in the four locations are shown in Table 7. This table highlights the shift in attendance at the clubs, across three terms of the school year. The trend at each of the schools reveals slight declines due to attrition, with the exception of School 2, which generally retained around 80% attendance throughout the year. The average attendance at School 1 and School 4 was particularly low, reaching 60% and 66% respectively in Term 4.

Table 7. Average attendance rates at clubs

WEEK	Average Term 2 %	Average Term 3 %	Average Term 4%
School 1	81%	66%	60%
School 2	81%	77%	79%
School 3	92%	92%	80%
School 4	81%	80%	66%

Some teachers and welfare staff raised concerns about extrinsic motivation being too closely associated with the students’ participation in activities such as the weekly club:

“They are given too much without having to earn it. They just want the computer and the other stuff handed to them ... so that’s what [Welfare Coordinator] has been trying to work on in terms of the things for the Clubs ... focus [ing] on behaviours and developing appropriate behaviours” (Teacher Interview, October).

“The one thing they need to do is help themselves. They’ve got to be open to the idea of elevating themselves” (Teacher Interview, October).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Schools today are consistently under pressure and accountable for performance measures at various stages of the education process. Test scores and other quantitative measures are commonly shared in the public arena that compare student achievements. A challenge remains for low-socio-economic schools to improve the educational outcomes for their students and to provide opportunities for students to increased rates of participation in further education. Partnerships with external organisations with specific support programs and links into the local community are well regarded amongst government bodies who are keen to see school improvements for disadvantaged students.

The project described here was designed to be a targeted program to support an identified group of disadvantaged students from four schools located in low socio-economic areas in two major cities in Australia. The project aimed to connect the students with their community, to develop their social skills and to become more engaged in their learning. The evidence from the student surveys and from the qualitative evidence gathered from the participants, teachers and parents, highlighted perceived gains from the experience for many students. There were early indicators showing that students were engaged with their schooling, had positive school ambitions, and displayed positive classroom behaviours.

However, when students’ attitude toward school decline, their engagement in learning is likely to follow a similar trajectory. While the goals of the project were related to increasing levels of engagement, the evidence from the two surveys demonstrates significant declines in engagement on some items in the short term (the first year of secondary schooling). The most significant findings can be categorised into *four* main themes all of which are indicators of a decline in their levels of student engagement:

- their *feelings* about school i.e. students place less value on their *future*; place less importance on *doing their best* at school;
- their *involvement* in learning i.e. students feel *less safe* at school, as well as being *less enthusiastic*;

- relationship with teachers, i.e. students feel teachers are not as helpful towards them by the end of the year; and
- *class organisation* i.e. students indicated they were more likely to disrupt their classes over the year.

The project was an attempt to minimise some of these attitudes and behaviours and it was apparent from the comments of the teachers and welfare staff, that the activities did enable some of individual students to grow in confidence, improve their self esteem and further refine their social skills at an individual level. However, these views were not corroborated in the survey data from the students. As stated, there were significant differences in some items to indicate that they became less engaged with their education and aspects of schooling over the courses of their first year in secondary school.

Interviews with the parents indicated that they remained positive about their child's levels of engagements to school and rated their chosen school as a good option which allowed their child to attend enthusiastically. The data from the follow up interviews also suggested that they thought the project's activities were valuable and helped develop student confidence and social skills, at least in the short term.

Participating in the programs constituted an opportunity for students to collaborate and become engaged in new and dynamic ways to solve problems and to experience and overcome challenges that were different to those normally experienced in school contexts. The challenge then remain about how the students might transfer the skills acquired in informal contexts to the formal schooling process where there is a defined curriculum, specific learning outcomes and rigid structures and routines. There seems to be a general consensus in the literature and in the field, that increased motivation of middle years students will lead to improvements in academic performance. However, every school is unique and a program that is successful in one context may not necessarily work in the same way for another school. Teachers and community organisations who offer intervention programs need to be able to review which aspects of the project worked well for each of the participating schools and modify future projects accordingly. The qualitative data derived from this project seems to indicate that a focus on intrinsic motivation and increased agency of the individual might hold potential to improve engagement. What this work has uncovered are some areas of concern that need to be addressed by all stakeholders.

In schools located in low socio economic areas, such as those included in this investigation, both students and the school culture are frequently described from a deficit viewpoint. This may be compounded when teachers have low expectations of the students and a commensurate lack of engagement by the students ensues. The curriculum in these contexts may not build on, or support the students' interests, needs or experiences. It is widely recognised that fostering student motivation is crucial for learning, but the evidence from this investigation has highlighted that when extra curricula events and activities are organised to increase engagement they may not have the desired results. One possible explanation might be related to the need to link these to the lived experiences in school curricula more explicitly. It has been suggested that there is a need to redesign contemporary curriculum and pedagogy so that it is more connected with students learning assets. That is, the curriculum needs to be better matched to create a "familiar resonance with cultural knowledge based in their home and community lives" (Zipin, 2013, p. 1). Learning must be meaningful, students need to discern the value of the learning experiences and connections between school and lifeworlds should be explicitly made to enhance the learning experiences.

Finally, if additional or alternative school programs are implemented they should be well designed to build on the students "funds of knowledge" so that they are relevant and meaningful to their lives (Zipin, 2013). With well nurtured relationships students can determine the ways in which their values and orientations to learning operate in academic achievement (Martin & Dowson, 2009). The additional intervention programs in this investigation highlighted the value of quality teachers who are already familiar with the student needs and the community surrounds.

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Notes

Note 1. Baseline mean score 1.09, Later year mean score 1.32. where $p < .05$. The lower the mean score for this set of statements, the more positive students feel. The closer to a score of 1, the more strongly students agree with the statement.

Note 2. Baseline mean score 1.67, Post mean score 2.00 where $p < .05$

Note 3. Baseline mean score was 1.56, Post mean score was 1.85 where $p < .05$

Note 4. Month of May mean score 1.11, October mean score 1.33 where $p < .05$. The lower the mean score for this set of statements, the more positive students feel. The closer to a score of 1, the more strongly students agree with the statement.

Note 5. With this set of data the higher the mean, the more positive behaviour of the students. Results from the student baseline survey indicate (mean of 3.31) to follow-up survey (mean of 2.91) where $p < .05$.

Note 6. With this statement framed positively, the lower the mean score the more positive the student behaviour. Results indicate baseline mean score 1.94, post mean score 2.11 where $p < .05$.

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